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The Death of Jesus And Our Death

by

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For nonbelievers, the death of Jesus Christ was that of a defeated itinerant Jewish preacher, like so many before him, who fell out of favor with the Roman power and ended up crucified on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem. That was the end of Jesus of Nazareth, even if he left a great impression on his followers who claimed that he still lived “in their hearts and minds” and who continued to preach his teachings throughout the world. It was really powerful psychological inspiration.

But it still remains very strange that a group of simple men of little note, of no rank, riches or positions, who were ordinary in every sense of the word, who by their own admission abandoned their teacher at the very moment of his greatest need; now after his death in what seems like the historical end in an ignominious death, boldly without fear started to preach at the cost of their lives, that the man was alive and had risen from the dead. That death on Calvary was not final but the beginning of a new saga of life that radically turned them around from being a group of cowards and frightened men, to men who were bold, unafraid and gave their lives as witness to a strange event of a risen Jesus whom they had seen and heard and eaten with. This was not a memory, powerful as it may be, left on these men but as they themselves boldly proclaimed, a real person whom they had known for three years, who was crucified under orders of Pontius Pilate, who was buried and after a time rose from the dead whom they saw and conversed and even ate with before he disappeared from their midst, promising to be with them to the end of time. More importantly, they each gave their lives to the truth of what they claim they had seen and heard and touched. And all gave their lives (nonviolently insofar as they were concerned) in witness of this central truth which they held to the end.

This is a source of wonder for all future generations because never has the death of any prophet or messiah produced such a nonviolent

reaction on a group of people who were once afraid of a death just like their Master's. That is why they originally ran away.

Their followers and disciples believed their word/testimony and passed it down to their children and often in their own blood. But never did any of them lift a sword or resort to any other form of violence to force others to believe or to accept what they believed. It was their lives and how they lived them that was the attraction for others, not force or worldly power. In fact, for three hundred years these followers were the object of violence, persecution and death; "See how these Christians love each other" was one phrase used to describe them for this initial period of time. The word spread throughout the known world of the time that "Jesus is alive" which was the core of their message and belief. It was the announcement of "good news." Only much later did they define what these beliefs were in particular but the core never changed then and now down to our day starting in the twenty-first century.

This cause of wonderment remains today in spite of all the mistakes and deviations of this group of men and women through the centuries and the message remains the same: Christ lived, Christ died, Christ rose from the dead, Christ will come again for His own. And the only force still remains the example and lives of those who believe in this message and who love each other.

Therefore the death of Jesus is altogether different from the death of every other person who has ever lived but only in view of its after-ness. Only when the human drama of Jesus of Nazareth was complete – "it is finished" – and its aftermath in the resurrection, do we understand the full import of the mission of Jesus. Because without the latter (resurrection) we are reduced to a complete human defeat that history in fact claims was the end. The gospels are in a sense a re-read of the life of Jesus in light of the pascal mystery. Everything was then seen in light of this mystery.

The only description of these events which we have is the recollection and memory of those who witnessed these events and who wrote them down in various communications which the witness of the first eyewitnesses had received from the apostles and disciples of Jesus himself. These were originally scattered as mementoes, preachers' guides, traditions, aid-memoirs, compendiums, etc. The word was preached not from a written text but from the live witnesses who had seen these events. When it was clear that Jesus would not soon return for his own, the community (or rather communities) felt the need to write these memorials down into texts which the same communities would accept as authentically reproducing the life, teaching and proclamations of the apostles which became known as the gospels – "good news" – that is, the faithful recording of the preaching of the apostles which they proclaimed

to the world after the great event of the pascal mystery of Jesus Christ. And so it remains to this day guaranteed in the preaching and witness of the Church.

But what do these memorials or gospels tell us about the death of Jesus? Not a whole lot and those who are looking for a detailed analysis of the death of Jesus will not find it in the gospels. That was not the concern of the apostles nor of the evangelists after them. They simply put down that Jesus suffered, that he was crucified outside of Jerusalem on order of the Roman governor and that after a time he died on that cross, was taken down and placed in another man's tomb and then the events that unfolded *after* these crucial events (resurrection, appearances to the disciples, disappearance in bodily form). These are two movements of the one pascal mystery which are inseparable and salvific for the witnesses to these events. One cannot have one without the other.

At the same time, the death of Jesus is fully human, fully incarnational, fully "us" precisely because God's love wanted to be with us to the very end. That is, that never again would we be alone at the most crucial times in our lives, i.e., our death. How could it ever be if God had come to miraculously save Jesus on the cross or even (in the basic human sense of human rescue) if He had not endured what we endure to the very end? What kind of an incarnation would that be? How could He be "perfect" (*Hebrews*) if He had not perfectly experienced exactly what we experience in life and in death? What kind of an incarnation would that be since what we are He, Christ, would not be? It is therefore crucial that we understand the death of Jesus and why it was as it was and not a fairy tale of rescue and deliverance as we see in novels and movies. God is silent and non interventional.

The death of Jesus is perfectly human, nothing pretty, nothing consoling, humiliated, alone, in almost despair, cries of aloneness and helplessness, human need, but above all, love and fidelity to the very end, even when despair is what is called for in the situation of a death on an ignominious gibbet. We should examine each of these aspects of the death of Jesus and how completely like our own death and the death of billions before and after us it really was. The Incarnation would not have been complete without this human death of Jesus or in other words, the scandalous death of God.

I should like to study the death section by section, even though this is terribly artificial since the death of Jesus was one complete act divided into various human emotions common to us all. The reader will excuse me for doing this but that is how we really understand things, i.e. by dividing things up and only later do we understand its full import.

The Attitude of Jesus: As with the thieves on the cross, we would have expected vituperation and curses over such an unjust act by criminals who were only "doing their duty" in following the orders of superiors.

They did not consider the moral implications of their acts. They were ordered to crucify, they followed orders and asked no questions. In the face of this injustice – perhaps the most unjust execution that there ever was – Christ prays for his enemies and even tries to find an excuse for them: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” He forgives even a thief who justly deserves what he is getting. We would have expected a curse (human justice) but we get divine injustice (prayer, forgiveness, excuse) from the victim of justice. Even amidst his own agony, he thinks only of forgiving and remembering others (“Behold your mother. Behold you son). Betrayed, he is forgiving; he is the object of hatred and mockery – “come down from the cross and we will believe you” – still he is loving and nonretributational. In short, we see the divine love even in the midst of darkness and seeming despair of “no exit.” He acts like his Father whose sun shines on the just and the unjust.

Jesus Experiences the Aloneness Of Death And Dying: Like every dying person who feels abandoned by everyone (Jesus was so abandoned even by his chosen disciples, in fact was denied publicly by the one whom he had made the foundation of his church) – even by his own Father. Jesus cries out for human deliverance as he had during his agony in the garden, “Let this chalice pass from me” “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” From God only silence, no deliverance, no rescue, only the alone-ness to face his humiliating end, a death on an ignominious gibbet of Roman capital punishment. Jesus just does not understand – as we as well cannot – how a loving Father could abandon his Son at precisely the moment he needs him most. “What father among you when his son asks for a loaf of bread hands him a snake?” Seemingly Christ asks for human help and he is handed a snake – ignominious death – from a loving Father. But God’s ways are not our ways and even Jesus had to learn that on the cross. The human way (“rescue”) is not God’s way and we must patiently trust God that he will make it right in the end *but only in his way not ours* (the answer of God the Father would be wonderful, beyond all human imagination, the resurrection into divine life of the Son in all of his humanity – something hidden from Christ on the cross).

Jesus Does Not Despair: Even when the darkness is complete and there is no “exit” from his terminal condition (death was the only way out humanly speaking), Christ continues to love and trust (which is only another word for love) the Father (“Into your hands I commend my spirit”). When death comes, it seems to (and does) shatter everything we have ever known and loved (relationships, joys, sorrows, the earth and all of its beauty, loved ones, even our faults, sins and betrayals) and we must leave everything behind. Then there is only one possible attitude: surrender to a loving presence whose depths and profundities we do not know (“eye has not seen... the things God has reserved for those who love him”) but it

is a surrender in faith when we feel nothing, know nothing for sure but trust completely; or we surrender into the nothingness from which we came and into which we now slip as we lose our consciousness. In either case, it is an act of faith. In the midst of complete darkness and in complete faith – like every one of us at the end – Jesus absolutely trusts and surrenders himself into the hands of what he holds to the very end – the hands of a loving Father, not knowing how or what or even if his Father will act. But that is what makes trust: *a complete surrender to the other unconditionally*. This is the last human act of Jesus: loving trust and surrender.

Conclusion: Thus the death of Jesus is completely human but shot through (like ours) with non-understanding, not knowing, pain-filled, seeming despair times, silence of God and no human intervention – all rolled up into one: the death of Jesus. But these do not have the last word. The last word of Jesus in spite of being surrounded by human darkness and despair – just as we will experience at the end of our lives – is one of trust and love of his Father on his lips as he dies. Where one would have expected hate, rebellion, frustration and fear, there is only trust and faith and love even in his human non-understanding. It is that death which we pray for a hundred times a day, that we too may have love and trust as we fall into the abyss who is God whom we only know as loving and merciful. That was the core teaching of Jesus throughout his public ministry and to which he was faithful even to the very end.

“Pray for us now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

“Into your hands I commend my spirit.”
